

**HOW FAR DID LACTANTIUS GO IN THE EULOGY OF  
CONSTANTINE THE GREAT? NOTES ON THE SO-CALLED  
TENDENTIOUS TERMINOLOGY OF DE MORTIBUS  
PERSECUTORUM**

It is widely accepted that Lactantius' writing *De mortibus persecutorum* is an important literary source for the historiography concerning the events from the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D., up to what is still referred to as the "edict of Mediolanum". Nevertheless, the scholarly literature generally considers Lactantius and his writing as being *tendentious*, also suggesting that *De mortibus persecutorum* is not trustful. Some of the scholars speak also about a work of propaganda. Still, this work continues to be used as one of the most important sources for history. For example, Timothy Barnes states that 'Lactantius has taken great care to be factually accurate, no matter how tendentious or misleading may be his presentation or how great the suppression of particular facts'<sup>1</sup>.

Now, beyond the matter of his tendentiousness in the presentation of the facts, which might be evident to historians, I wondered how far Lactantius went in making the portrait of Constantine. What kind of words and expressions did he use? There is, of course, a direct depicting of Constantine and an indirect one. When I say direct depicting of Constantine, I mean description of him or of his deeds by using a series of epithets, expressions or even verbs applied directly to Constantine, no matter whether by Lactantius himself or through the mouth of his characters.

When talking about the indirect portrait, I take into consideration attitude of other characters or persons, which denote positive characteristics of Constantine.

From the very beginning, Lactantius, without mentioning the name of Constantine, brings forward the idea of princes who have been 'raised up by God, to rescind the impious and sanguinary edicts of the tyrants and provide for the welfare of mankind, so that now the cloud of past times is dispelled, and peace and serenity gladden all hearts' (1,3).

The reader will later find out that Constantine is one of the saviour princes. I will not insist, but I will make mention of the fact that God is presented as

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<sup>1</sup> T.D. Barnes, *Early Christian Hagiography and Roman History*, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2010, p. 116.

an actor on the scene of history: it is God who raises princes; it is God who punishes the wicked emperors and persecutors of the righteous faith; it is God who re-establishes the peace among people. All these, of course, through the hands of men whom He chooses and whom He calls. It is men's choice if he answers or not the calling of God. Thus, being chosen, or called, or raised up by God contributes already to a positive portrait of the future emperor Constantine. This idea is repeated throughout the writing: Constantine escapes the repeated murder attempts of Galerius, because 'God's hand protected him' and He Himself, 'in the very moment of jeopardy, rescued him from the hands of Galerius' (24,5). Of course, everybody is acquainted with the epiphany of Christ's monogram, which took place before the battle of Milvian Bridge (44,5). During the battle itself, Lactantius tells us that 'the hand of God was above the battle array' (44,9).

Thus, it is clear that Lactantius believes or, at least, confesses that Constantine was chosen and protected by God. We can understand then why Lactantius calls Constantine 'sanctissimus', when he introduces him into the narrative (18,10). I am not sure whether to argue or not against myself and against my allegations I published several years ago in my PhD thesis upon the language of Lactantius in *De mortibus*. I promoted then the following idea:

'It is probably that the author, being a Christian, does not refer to a pagan Emperors official title of 'sanctissimus'. Nor can we speak about a canonization «avant la lettre». It is rather a revealing of the classical legacy, where *sanctus* was also referring to the moral, not necessary religious qualities of a person. Nevertheless, it is – I added – an exception for a Christian writer, especially at the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century'<sup>2</sup>.

As I said, I am not sure whether I was wrong or not. But fact is that I started to reconsider my former allegations.

First, I might have been influenced by a false image of what canonicity means. I was led by the idea that only those things can be canonical, that the Church declares at a certain moment. Thus, it would have been improbable for the Church, at that moment, to consider Constantine as a Saint. But, actually, according to Eastern ecclesiology, canonicity does not suppose a *terminus a quo* for the things or persons which are declared as canonical. In some cases, it only supposes a *terminus a quo* for recognition of canonicity. One person does not become a Saint from the moment he or she has been declared Saint by the Church. According to Eastern theology, as I mentioned before, God chooses His own Saints by addressing them a call, and the 'activation' – if I may say so – of the mission one has been called to can be made only by a positive answer to the calling. Therefore, if Constantine is a Saint, he is not a Saint from the moment the institutional Church declared him as such. That is why I consider I was misled by a false image of the idea of canonicity when I said that 'we cannot speak about a canonization «avant la lettre»'.

Second, I suspect myself having been influenced by the translation into modern languages of this *sanctissimus*. From an analysis of the translations,

<sup>2</sup> G. Octavian, *Lactantius – De mortibus persecutorum. Studiu filologic*, Editura Universității din București, (Bucharest University Press), 2009, p. 226 (§ 4.2.4.3.).

it is easy to notice that the translators are rather embarrassed by this word. Moreover, from one translation to another, we cannot find similarities with the predecessors, although they had the previous translations at disposal and they were using them in other contexts. But there is something which unifies them: the consideration of *sanctissimus* in a moral sense. Therefore, if I argue, in this point, against myself, I argue against some previous translators and interpreters of *De mortibus persecutorum*, as well.

Third – and this is, actually, more important – all other 5 occurrences of *sanctus* in this little work of Lactantius are used with certain reference to Christian realities.

So, if, on one hand, Lactantius certainly believes that Constantine is the chosen of God and, on the other hand, *sanctus* is elsewhere used with certain reference to religious aspects, why would it be impossible for the author to call Constantine *sanctissimus* with reference to the same belief of his? I am not saying that *sanctissimus* would refer to Constantine as a ‘Saint’, in the sense this word will be later used and in the sense we use it nowadays, but I also think that it cannot be deprived, in this context, of its religious meaning, namely Christian.

In the same way Lactantius presents Constantine as *restitutor* of the Christian faith, when saying that ‘Constantine Augustus, having assumed the government, made it his first care to restore the Christians to their worship and to their God; and so began his administration by reinstating the holy religion’.

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The direct portrait of Constantine from chapter 18 continues in words of praise and admiration: Constantine is ‘well meriting the high station of Caesar. The distinguished comeliness of his figure, his strict attention to all military duties, his virtuous demeanour and singular affability had endeared him to the troops, and made him the choice of every individual’. This last idea – Constantine’s popularity among soldiers and among people – is to be found elsewhere in the book, as well. After the battle from the Milvian Bridge he is received in Rome with great joy by the senators and by the people (25,1; 44,10).

We also find out about Constantine’s clemency (29,4-8), which is a feature that noble princes have, according to Roman traditional thinking<sup>3</sup>. We also find out about his extraordinary physical capacities, when he flew away towards taking power from the hands of his father (24,6-8).

Let us say that the presentation of Constantius, his father, as a good ruler (8,7) and mentioning the fidelity of his wife, Fausta (30,3), indirect contribute as well towards a positive portrait of Constantine.

But, from this way of making a positive portrait of Constantine, it is difficult to say that Lactantius shows tendentiousness or that he is an instrument of propaganda. First of all, Constantine had no need of propaganda at that moment: he was beloved by his soldiers; he had the power, he didn’t need any further political support from the people we suppose would have read the text of Lactantius. If we suppose that Constantine would have expected support from Christian high-levelled senators or military, then it would have been enough for him to give a series of laws in favor of Christians; which he in fact did. If we

<sup>3</sup> See Seneca’s *De clementia*.

suppose that he would try to obtain the sympathy of pagan privileged people, then a propagandistic text presenting him as a Christian or supporting Christians would have been the worse idea on earth.

As for the author's tendentiousness, I assume that Lactantius did not go beyond the normal limits of subjectivity. In fact, he had an unfeigned admiration towards Constantine, so it is absolutely normal to praise him. Any other writer of the Antiquity, as any other writer of nowadays, wouldn't avoid make use of eulogy when depicting one's favorite person or character, just because some future scholars might consider him as tendentious. What I am saying is that Lactantius did not abuse of praising words, but he preserved a normal way of making a positive portrait.

One final word: we should not forget what the purpose of Lactantius is with this work, namely to show that those who persecuted the Christian faith and its believers have been removed from their lives by a harsh and shameful death. Despite the fact that *De mortibus* remains an important historiographical source, Lactantius is not a chronographer, neither had he political ambitions. Given this, it is less probable that Lactantius showed tendentiousness when depicting Constantine rather than being him himself, that is showing admiration within the limits of a normal eulogy.

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КОЛИКО ДАЛЕКО ЈЕ ЛАКТАНЦИЈЕ ОТИШАО У ПОХВАЛИ О КОНСТАНТИНУ  
ВЕЛИКОМ? БЕЛЕШКЕ О ТАКОЗВАНОЈ ТЕНДЕНЦИОЗНОЈ ТЕРМИНОЛОГИЈИ  
У DE MORTIBUS PERSECUTORUM

Лактанцијев приказ Константина у *De mortibus persecutorum* у позитивном смислу често је интерпретиран као начин империјалне пропаганде. Мада, када се погледа сам текст, може се увидети да аутор не прелази границе нормалне, мада субјективне, похвале, једноставног поштоваоца Константина. Такође сам тврдио да у том тренутку, Константину чак није ни била потребна никаква пропаганда. Сходно томе, Константинов опис у *De mortibus persecutorum* треба се сматрати пре као нормалан лични позитиван портрет него као тенденциозан. Посебна пажња дата је епитету 'sanctissimus' (18,10) који се односио на Константина, преиспитивањем његовог значења са тачке гледишта источне еклесиологије и хагиологије.